

Public Libraries as Partners for Health

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Latoya Simmons] Welcome to this edition of *PCD Sound Bites*. I'm your host Latoya Simmons. As centers for community engagement and education, public libraries could provide ideal spaces for the transfer of health information and possibly help to improve population health. Research shows that public libraries across the country host more than a billion in-person visits annually, and during those visits, nearly half of patrons report using the libraries' digital resources to search for health information. Joining me by phone today is Dr. Eliza Whiteman, a research fellow with the Healthy Library Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Public Health Initiatives. We'll be discussing her research, which documents and reinforces the evidence that public libraries address a number of important health issues and can be an integral partner in public health. Thank you for joining me, Eliza.

[Eliza Whiteman] Thank you so much for having me.

[Latoya Simmons] Eliza, please begin with a brief overview of your study.

[Eliza Whiteman] Sure. So the research was conducted by the Healthy Library Initiative here at Penn, and we've been doing community-based research about health and libraries in Philadelphia for the past four years. Building on our Philadelphia research, we conducted a web-based survey of all public library directors in the state of Pennsylvania to find out if what we were seeing in Philadelphia—which is an urban area—was similar across other geographies in the state. The survey is about the daily work practice of public librarians, with a focus on the social determinants of health, by which we mean access to social and economic factors that contribute to health, such as education, employment, and the neighborhood where people live. We received more than 250 responses from libraries across the state. Respondents indicated that they frequently interact with library patrons about their health and social needs, including things like help with employment, enrolling in social welfare benefits, and finding food. But our respondents, library staff, indicated that they feel underprepared by their professional training to address many of their patrons' needs.

[Latoya Simmons] Why do public libraries play such an important role in public health?

[Eliza Whiteman] For one thing, Americans go to the library almost twice as often as they go to the doctor. In fact, they make 1.5 billion visits to the library each year, which provides an excellent opportunity to meet people where they are. At those library visits that Americans are making, over 40 percent of information searches are about health-related information. And our community interviews that we've conducted here in Philadelphia have documented that library staff are important public health surveillance sentinels in our community. But this valuable role has been largely unrecognized by the public health community to date. Library staff are on the front lines of community service, their doors are free and open to everyone, and they hear daily requests for assistance from a steady flow of very highly diverse patrons. As a result, librarians

routinely address basic human needs, helping patrons to access housing, food, employment, and health care.

[Latoya Simmons] Why is it so important to have policies and support in place for libraries and their staff to address public health issues?

[Eliza Whiteman] Being on the front lines, librarians are in many ways like health care providers or social workers. But as we found in our study, librarians feel like their formal professional training has inadequately prepared them for this central part of their jobs. Sometimes patrons' health and social needs can seem insurmountable, which can be very stressful for librarians, who are often highly committed to public service. Work-related stress and secondary trauma, which is stress that results from hearing about another's trauma, are common among librarians who interact with vulnerable patron populations. This means that having policies and support in place can help library staff better meet the needs of their patrons and also reduce the job strain that they experience.

[Latoya Simmons] The opioid crisis is a pressing health issue right now. What role can libraries and their staff play in addressing this concerning health epidemic?

[Eliza Whiteman] Our study found that 12 percent of Pennsylvania's public libraries experienced at least one drug overdose on-site over the course of the past year. And for many libraries, opioid overdoses have become a routine occurrence, and this is confirmed by recent interviews we conducted with more than 46 public librarians from across the country at the recent Public Library Association annual meeting here in Philadelphia. Libraries and their staff can play a really essential role in recognizing and responding to opioid use and overdoses. As part of the Healthy Library Initiative, we're partnering here in Philadelphia with the Department of Public Health to facilitate opioid awareness and overdose reversal trainings in order to teach both library staff and community members how to use the opioid overdose antidote called Naloxone.

[Latoya Simmons] Library staff are often helping vulnerable populations connect to health information. What did you find when you looked at this link?

[Eliza Whiteman] So in addition to connecting vulnerable populations with health information, we found that library staff are very frequently interacting with their patrons around social concerns, such as mental health, substance use, welfare, employment, and domestic violence.

[Latoya Simmons] Your study illustrates the importance of librarians as public health allies. What actions need to be taken to help library staff more adequately address the health concerns you've mentioned?

[Eliza Whiteman] So one thing we have done here in Philadelphia is to design and implement the Community Health Specialist Trainings. These trainings are intended to help library staff recognize, engage, and refer vulnerable patrons to appropriate community services. On-site trainings, such as the Community Health Specialist Trainings, are an important first step in improving the self-efficacy of library staff members in assisting their patrons. However, other possible models include reforming library science degree curricula and creating formal

partnerships between health professionals and public libraries to offer support to both staff and patrons.

[Latoya Simmons] Thank you, Eliza. You can read her study, “Public Libraries as Partners for Health,” online at [cdc.gov/pcd](https://www.cdc.gov/pcd).

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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